

Modi-Biden call boosts TRIPS flexibility efforts

TNN | Apr 28, 2021, 09.21 AM IST



NEW DELHI: The US has begun consultations on easing some of the patent and other intellectual property rights rules for Covid vaccines and drugs as the issue was flagged by PM Narendra Modi during his interaction with American president Joe Biden on Monday.

On Monday, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai held consultations with Pfizer chairman & CEO Albert Bourla and AstraZeneca US business head Ruud Dobber, even as India and South Africa, the joint proponents of the TRIPS waiver proposal at the WTO, held talks.

The details of what transpired during the meeting between commerce minister Piyush Goyal and his South African counterpart Ebrahim Patel was not immediately known but, as reported first by TOI last week, the two countries are looking to revise their proposal.

Congratulations!

You have successfully cast your vote

Login to view result

Many see the move as a repeat of the joint effort launched at the start of the millennium when South Africa highlighted the need for access to cheap AIDS drugs, while India pushed hard and managed to build a coalition that led to compulsory licensing provisions for all countries under TRIPS.

This time, while European countries have openly announced their moves to block efforts for relaxation that will enable manufacturers in countries such as India to supply vaccines and other drugs to Africa and other poor and developing countries, the US has not backed the plan, prompting Modi to take it up with Biden during a call between the two leaders.

This will include allowing companies such as Serum Institute to not just make vaccines under licensing agreements in India but also to export.

“For the US, the opposition is coming from the huge pharma lobby, which has invested heavily in vaccines and may need to invest further as there is already discussion around second- and third-generation vaccines. Their argument is that if countries erode the value of intellectual property, there is a huge disincentive for companies,” said Sachin Chaturvedi, who heads Research and Information Systems for developing countries, a think tank. He said that with the emergence of companies such as Bharat Biotech, India was no longer just a producer of generic drugs but also an IP holder. “There is pressure coming from senators and other supporters of Biden for the US to soften its stance,” Chaturvedi added.

Biswajit Dhar, a professor at JNU, however, does not see the issue going through. “In 2000-21, there was much greater engagement with other countries. Besides, with the US government itself throwing money into some of the vaccine development, the Biden administration is turning a blind eye to the profits that the drug companies are going to earn,” he said.